

15 MINUTES

A life without a narrative

BY EVAN WILLIAMS

ewilliams@floridaweekly.com

For the last few years, three or four dogs seemed to follow Alan Mattingly wherever he went. They waited for him outside bars in downtown Fort Myers, or trailed him around his neighborhood a few blocks away, in Dean Park. He was like a boozed-up pied piper of neighborhood dogs. Most of them used to belong to an old hippie named Bob, who had left town. Bob had a severely dilapidated house in Dean Park for a while. It was a place where an "eclectic" group of people liked to show up late after the bars closed. Bob, the master of his domain, greeted guests with a hearty Irish "Eh, laddie!" from under his long, dirty beard. He moved out of town four or five years ago and someone took on the task of refurbishing the house, but his dogs stayed and somehow attached themselves to Mr. Mattingly.

But eventually they ran off or were impounded, died or found new homes. Last Sunday evening, as Mr. Mattingly's long, lean frame came around the corner of Woodford Avenue riding a tricycle, holding a drink in a plastic NFL cup, only one dog followed him.

"This isn't one of Bob's," he said.

The dog trailed him downtown to The Cigar Bar and fell asleep in front of the humidifier. Mr. Mattingly ordered a beer and sat outside where he directed some curbside commentary toward passing women. "You're hot," he said. And then toward a big truck with chrome wheels that moved slowly down the street. "Hey," he yelled

out toward the driver's tinted window, which was cracked open. "I bet if you had a bigger (expletive) you'd be driving a smaller truck!"

Juxtaposing that salty behavior, his face has a kind, hangdog look, weathered and distantly handsome with clear blue eyes. Mr. Mattingly suddenly broke into an enormous grin and dark, cackling laughter.

What he remembers about his life on this evening is, unsurprisingly, not very cohesive. It lacks the clarity and accuracy of sobriety, and perhaps contains a few fictional details, such as the time he spent in an Iranian prison. But who knows? There's no narrative arc to his life, at least not on this night, only random events like beads spilling off a string.

He is "57 or 58" years old, born in Zanesville, Ohio, near where his parents bought a farm out in the country, before they moved to Dresden, Ohio.

As a boy, he got up before dawn to deliver the daily newspaper, and tried to avoid his father, a tough steel mill worker.

"People used to come from other states to kick my dad's ass," he said. "By the time I was 12, I tried to stay away from the son of bitch. He'd knock you out."

He had four sisters and a brother who was killed in Vietnam in 1969, a year before Mr. Mattingly graduated from high school. As a teenager, he hitchhiked to Florida with his friend Willy Wilcox. Years later, he went by himself to New York City.

In the 1970s, he found a flight from New York to Luxembourg for \$69 and spent many years — three? five? 20? — traveling

abroad.

"I've forgotten more than I remember," Mr. Mattingly said.

He carried a guitar with him "to India," inspired by his favorite musicians, such as Leonard Cohen and Simon & Garfunkel. But he never learned how to play the chords or tune the guitar. He met "two chicks from California" in the Greek Islands, on the beach.

"You ever been to the Greek Islands, hey baby?" he asks, cackling with laughter again. "The Greek Islands are a mess."

He got himself locked up in an Iranian prison on drug-related charges, then in a Greek prison for similar reasons. Upon returning to the United States, he found his way to Aspen, Colo., where for a while he managed a small inn at the base of Ajax Mountain.

"It was the oldest house in town," he said of the lodge. "It had a bunkhouse out back. But I tell you what, it was a prime piece of property."

In Aspen, he frequented the bar at Hotel Jerome, a well-known haunt of the late "Gonzo" journalist Hunter S. Thompson. "I used to sit next to Hunter every afternoon about 5:15 p.m.," Mr. Mattingly said. "We didn't talk. We'd sit two barstools away from each other and give each other dirty looks."

He was eventually busted for selling marijuana out of the lodge.



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Alan Mattingly

"D.A. popped me in Aspen," Mr. Mattingly said. They sent him to the Federal Correctional Institute in Safford, Ariz., where "there was this kid that I did time with in Iran."

After he got out of prison, he came back to Southwest Florida. About 12 years ago, when he was working as a heavy-equipment mechanic for Caterpillar, he bought a house in the Dean Park neighborhood near downtown. He still lives there, although he's been collecting unemployment money for a few years.

He added, apropos of nothing: "About 500 miles south of Bombay there was a Portuguese colony. You didn't even have to wear clothes — and it was acid central. Oh man, you could have fun."

The dog wandered out of the bar and stared up at Mr. Mattingly, ready for a trip to Bombay, or wherever he might take her next. ■



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